

Native Prairie

STEWARDSHIP

YOUR WILDLIFE NEIGHBOURS

FACT SHEET

Real life encounters

Little taller than a large dog, with eyes bigger than a horse's, a pronghorn antelope can spot your movement on the open prairie from a distance of six kilometers.

And as the fastest animal on the continent, achieving speeds of up to 80 km/hr, the pronghorn does its level best to stay out of your way. It is no wonder we feel lucky when we glimpse a herd.

Be it a pronghorn antelope stretching its gait, a few mule deer jumping a fenceline, a coyote nosing a gopher hole, or a sage grouse pecking at pebbles, an unexpected encounter with prairie wildlife enriches country living. Farm families connect regularly with nature in a way city people envy. How different it is for a ten year old child to see a badger in a photograph, and then to see one returning at sunrise to its burrow, the same wind touching the

badger's face as the child's.

For some farmers, this opportunity to experience wildlife in the course of their daily lives is reason enough for them to protect their native

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Though little larger than a house cat, the swift fox can reach speeds up to 50 km/hour. It disappeared in the 1930s, but is now being reintroduced to areas of southwestern Saskatchewan.



prairie. They recognize that the fate of our wildlife rides with the fate of its habitat.

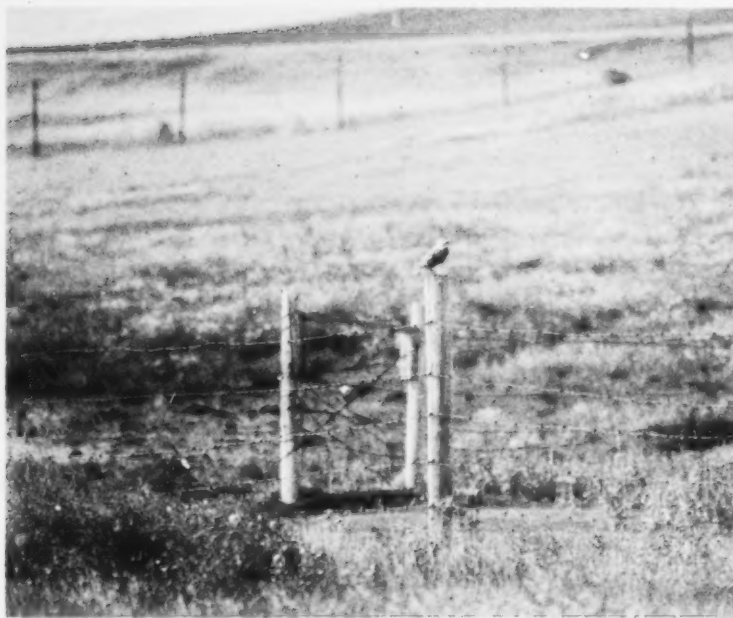
Cycles of life

A farmer from the Morse area speaks of the importance of mice. He says that field mice reproduce rapidly, and don't hibernate. In the dead of winter, he recalls how you can see mice tracks in the morning snow. Burrowing owls prey upon them in the dark of night by listening for the small sounds they make. Red-tailed hawks detect their scurrying beneath the noonday sun. Coyotes detect their odour.

This farmer knows that plants transform energy from sunlight, mice absorb energy by eating plants, and predators like coyotes absorb energy by eating mice. In an ecosystem, everything interrelates, from soil conditions and weather patterns to plant species and the sizes of animal and insect populations. Interdependency is the rule. Like most farmers, this resident of the land is aware of the cycles of life that surround him.

And no, he does not mind sharing the prairie. He knows the chokecherry bushes in an abandoned homestead yard have become home to a flock of pheasant. He knows where a family of red fox lives along a windbreak. He knows the cottontails, the jackrabbits, the mule deer, the white-tailed deer, the badgers have their homes hidden about on the native prairie.

From atop a tractor, for him, like for so many other farmers, spying wildlife is a welcome diversion, like conversation with an eccentric neighbour.



A meal of grasshoppers pleases the small burrowing owl, a nocturnal hunter which at one time was a common sight on the open prairie.

An intensifying problem

Our wildlife are threatened. This is not a new problem, although awareness of it varies. The disappearance of the bison is legendary; fewer people realize that the pronghorn antelope once rivalled the bison in numbers. No one remembers the prairie grizzly.

Today, the problem of disappearing wildlife is intensifying. In many areas, even common species like jackrabbits are depleting in numbers. Can you recall the last time you saw a family of burrowing owls standing by a nesting hole, or a ferruginous hawk circling in thermal currents above a community of gophers?

If you are in your fifties or older, you probably saw plenty of these birds as a child, even if you didn't know how to identify them. They were more abundant then. You are less likely to have seen either a burrowing owl or a ferruginous hawk in the last ten years. The ferruginous hawk has the unfortunate distinction of being classified as "threatened". The burrowing owl has slipped closer to extinction, and as of April 1995, has been classified as "endangered".

Nearing knockout

One third of the endangered or threatened species of North America call the prairie their home for at least part of the year. Here are some examples: the whooping crane, the trumpeter swan, the peregrine falcon, the Eskimo curlew, the piping plover, the burrowing owl, the ferruginous hawk, the sage grouse, the Caspian tern, the logger-head shrike, the Baird's sparrow, the prairie long-tailed weasel, the swift fox, the black-tailed prairie dog. These are all threatened, endangered, and extirpated species whose habitat is native prairie.

Although many factors contribute to the disappearance of wildlife, such as troubles in the food chain and hunting, habitat destruction is major. And as our native prairie disappears, what remains of it will become ever more critical to the survival of our prairie wildlife.

Pulling the ground out

You probably have a pretty good idea of how little native prairie remains in your township. Many farmers in the R.M. of Yellowgrass will not be too surprised to find that only six patches of native prairie remain, ranging from 30 acres to two acres. And this is not unusual.

Many people call this "remnant" native prairie because what remains of an ecological system that once covered the land from Edmonton to the Gulf of Mexico is found only in fragments.

When neighbours face trouble

It's thinking like this that will preserve our wildlife for all time. This Morse area farmer, like many other farmers, lives with a quiet and resolute conviction to maintain the health of the land that supports him. Without his concern, native prairie seems to disappear as fast as our fleet-footed antelope. Farmers who respect and appreciate wildlife as their neighbours, also respect and appreciate their native prairie homes.

This deserves applause, for healthy native prairie means healthier wildlife populations. Besides that, preserving native prairie is downright neighbourly. A coyote can't howl its thanks, let alone know what you have done for it, but just watch the expression on the face of a child who spots a coyote running wild.

For more information contact:

Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation
Room 101 - 2022 Cornwall Street
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 2K5
Tel: (306) 787-0726
Fax: (306) 787-0780
website: <http://wetland.sk.ca>
e-mail: swccnet@wetland.sk.ca

* threatened: likely to be endangered unless things change.
** endangered: near extirpation or extinction
*** extirpated: locally extinct but exists elsewhere



The threatened ferruginous hawk.

Figuring in wildlife

Were you to ask a Morse area farmer why he does not destroy that abandoned homestead and put the land into production he might say, "Not worth the trouble."

This statement summarizes his assessment. You can be sure that among the items that weigh in this assessment are those seemingly insignificant bushes that provide a home to the pheasants. He knows they need a place to live.

The way he thinks about those chokecherry bushes extends to the way he thinks about his native prairie as well. He respects the knowledge that what little he has is home to many species of wildlife. To destroy the remaining native prairie would destroy their homes. To him, a bottom line assessment of a patch of native prairie that does not figure in a healthy community of native grasses and forbs, and the homes of wildlife, would be one that was simply incomplete and inadequate.

His bottom line is richer in detail, and broader in its conception of value, than most corporate boards would feel comfortable with. But then, that's at least partially why he continues to farm; his decisions are his and his family's, and he lives by them. He answers to himself, and part of him belongs to the land.



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